

## مشكلة الفصحى واللهجات

# Problems of Spoken-Written Arabic

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By Hussein Maxos [www.hmaxos.com](http://www.hmaxos.com) Telefax: 963 11 332 5056

#### **Introduction: Language and identity**

Spoken Arabic, including the differences within the Arabic dialects and accents, has been subject to groundless exaggerations and serious misunderstanding due to several factors. First, the lack of serious studies conducted by native speakers who tend to judge Spoken Arabic from a localist, pan-Arab nationalist or Islamist (but never scientific) point of view. Second, the efforts made by the orientalist were viewed as a foreign and lacked a firm grounding. Localism flourished after World War I when Britain and France divided the Arab world into small separate states and each state proceeded to establish its own government, media and educational system. Sensing the danger of deeper separatism, the Arab nationalist and Islamist governments, which are in the majority, decided to adopt written Arabic for all forms of written communication and education. As result, they underestimated and ignored their spoken Arabic. The other extreme is typified by the localist/sectarianist governments in Egypt and Lebanon who gave excessive attention to their spoken Arabic, as to the extent that many of them no longer consider their dialects Arabic nor themselves as Arabs. Both these attitudes are unscientific and have led to serious problems. Noam Chomsky, The American linguist and political analyst, in his book *Language and Responsibility* says: "In the old Ottoman Empire, regions such as the Levant incorporated numerous local communities, related to each other in various ways, and with a good deal of linguistic variation as well. Nobody spoke the Classical Arabic taught in schools, but the so-called dialects were considered inferior. The intervention of the Western imperial powers led to a system of states, leaving bitter and unresolved conflicts and antagonisms, a system in which each individual must define himself as belonging to a nation or a *nation-state*. It is a system imposed from the outside on a region ill-adapted to it".

Today, Arabs learn their spoken language in a passive and spontaneous way from their everyday experiences in daily life while they study exclusively written Arabic. In fact, Arab students are scrupulously required to avoid use of dialect in schools and are taught to stigmatize spoken "Ammia" whenever possible in order to maintain their national or religious identity. Localist and sectarianist systems amplify the distinction of their dialects-accent also for the sake of identity emphasis at the expense of the shared language and culture with the rest of the Arab world. These problems of identity crisis,

identity conflicts and ideological games have served to weaken the language and have created many misconceptions and difficulties for the average Arab.

The problem is even worse for non-native students of Arabic, because they do not have the advantage of being exposed to years of spontaneous learning. When non-natives come to the Arab world to study Arabic, they are usually encouraged to study only written Arabic and speak only written Arabic. Paradoxically, Arabs themselves by and large cannot speak written Arabic correctly. When Arabs attempt to speak written Arabic with non-natives or, say in an interview on TV, they quickly get confused and start to mix written forms with spoken language in an odd way. How can they expect a foreigner to be better in this respect than the native speaker? The problem occurs because Arab educators and authorities misunderstand the natural function of the language including written language. The fact is that the average Arabs are pleasantly surprised and relieved when they encounter a non-native student who is fluent in spoken Arabic. Immediately, they relax and start to talk normally without any strange mixtures or unnaturalness. Clearly, Arabs are most comfortable and at ease when speaking in their native dialect.

### **Why some Arabs don't like to speak Arabic – Historical background**

Localism Sectarianism Westernization Tourism *and identity crisis*

As mentioned earlier, there is a tendency toward localism and sectarianism in Egypt and Lebanon, which affected the feeling of Arab identity and, included, a willingness to speak Arabic. Localism in Egypt took the shape of Pharaohism and became visible in the late seventies of the twentieth century after the Arab boycott against Egypt and the suspension of Egyptian membership in the Arab League. That followed the American sponsored unilateral peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, because it neutralized Egypt as the largest Arab army against Israel. Localism in Lebanon took the shape of multiple severe sectarian conflicts: Muslim-Christian, Lebanese-Palestinian, Maronite-Shiite etc. Sectarian tensions flared in the nineteenth century when Lebanon received many Christian missionaries from America (Protestant), France (Catholic) and Russia (Orthodox). Other parts of the Arab world e.g. Syria and Egypt received Christian missionaries, but no similar success was achieved as occurred in Lebanon. A legacy of the French colonial period, sectarian division of power gave the Christian Maronite excessive authority. That helped to cause two bloody civil wars in Lebanon. This led in turn to a tragedy without precedent when the Maronite party allied with Israel to commit massacres against the Palestinian-Lebanese in Sabra and Shatila camps, and slaughtering the person according to ID card.

These examples show how deep and bitter sectarian conflict can be and illustrates the fragmentation of Arab national identity there, which in turn reflects directly and negatively on the language. The influx of westernization among Urban Lebanese, Jordanian and northern Egyptian communities plus the growth of commercial tourism, particularly in Egypt and Jordan, have caused large number of Arabs to learn English and come to depend on tourism as source of living. In such an atmosphere, Westerners studying language and culture have a hard time trying to distinguish themselves from the flow of generic Western tourists. The students discover that everybody wants to sell them something and no one is willing to speak Arabic with them. They become a small minority swimming against the stream. By contrast, the Arab nationalist and/or Islamist systems, that characterize other parts of the Arab world e.g. Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Sudan and Libya offer fewer obstacles to the non-native student of Arabic and offer more in the way of genuine hospitality and generosity.

### **Common Misconceptions about spoken - written Arabic:**

1. Spoken Arabic is colloquial slang and not spoken in formal communication.
2. Spoken Arabic has no grammar and no rules so it is confusing and useless to learn.
3. Written Arabic was the spoken language of the medieval golden Arab ages and it had no dialects, colloquialism nor slang.
4. Arabs from different regions must use written Arabic to communicate, because they do not understand each others' dialects i.e. Libyan speaking to Omani or Syrian speaking to Yemeni or Sudani.
5. Spoken Arabic is very different and unlike modern written Arabic or the spoken and written Arabic of medieval times.
6. Spoken Arabic has more foreign influence than written Arabic and came to existence largely because of the long foreign control over the Arab world.
7. Modern written Arabic is the only correct and pure Arabic and is the same as the language of the holy Qur'an. Spoken Arabic is impure and unrelated to the Qur'an.
8. Any modernizing or reform of Arabic language aimed at increasing practical understanding would destroy the beauty and charm of Arabic.
9. The more complicated and rhetorical language an Arab writer or speaker uses, the better he/she is considered to be.
10. The origin of Arabic is unknown and mysterious and should remain so.
11. Arabic is the most difficult language in the world.

### **Recommended Solutions: Unity within diversity- Reconciliation**

What is called for is, first, an understanding of Arabic based on scientific analysis of the actual use of the language by the majority of people who speak it. Second, Arab countries need to promote secular and liberal attitudes that include an in-depth understanding of the culture, heritage and diversity of the Arab-Islamic-Middle Eastern society. Third, there is a need for respect and tolerance of the natural function of each type of language within the ethnic and cultural richness of the region. The result has to be reconciliation between Spoken and written Arabic, which means reconciliation between the authority and intellectual elites on one hand and the overwhelming majority of the Arab people on the other. It also means bridging the gap between past and present.

### **Useful tips for non-native students of Arabic:**

1. Speak the spoken and use it in speaking. Write the written form (exactly like what Arabs –the native speakers- do).
2. Avoid tourist areas and westernized places, where English or other European languages are in widespread use.
3. When you notice people talking to you and mixing their language, ask them politely to speak naturally but slowly.
4. Finish the beginning and intermediate levels of your Arabic course as fast as you can. The sooner you can begin using spoken Arabic, the more fruitful and comfortable your experience in the Arab world will definitely be.
5. Do not use the word "*Ammia*" for spoken Arabic. It is stigmatic and it will only remind people of their misconceptions about Arabic. Use "*Mahki*" or "*Lahja*" instead, because it is more scientific and neutral.

6. In order to avoid localist traps that could give wrong information and interpretation, try to befriend as many people as you can, from all ethnic groups and make visits to other Arab areas.
7. If possible, pursue your studies outside of urban communities in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon (and North Africa) where fewer people speak good English.
8. Speaking with Arabs about Arabic will not help much, but speaking with them in Arabic about anything else will.
9. These warning words “don’t” and “avoid” are used here to strengthen your courage. Being with Arabs is so safe and you always will find it easy to make friends in the Arab world. Ignore the western media, which is not usually a good source of information about Arabs.

### **The Arabic dialectal map: Interrelations and distinctions**

Many Arabic dialects are very old, dating back over sixteen centuries and are related to ancient Semitic languages and dialects, particularly Aramaic. Their distribution is dependent on demographic factors such as tribal movements and immigration within the Arab world. For example, the (Imala) pronunciation of the medial letter Alef is the same in Aleppo and Beirut and the use of the word **بعد** with the meaning of “yet” is the same in Saudi, western Syria and Lebanon. Arab dialects share many key vocabulary and grammar items compared to written Arabic such as: the simplification of medial and final hamza, absence of dual (in verbs, nouns, pronouns, demonstrative and possessive), having one relative pronoun (ten in written), simple negation etc. The map of spoken Arabic dialects can be approximately drawn to include two major families of dialects that are divided to other sub-dialects/accents. Geographic, environmental, economic and ethnic factors play a great role in this dialectal distribution. The first is the Eastern Mediterranean family that includes northern Egypt, Lebanon, central and western Syria, Palestine and Jordan. What’s remarkable about this family is the use of prefix “ب” with imperfect verbs and the special pronunciation of the three letters “ظ، ذ، ث”. It includes the Urban Eastern Mediterranean (UEM) dialect-accent, which most non-native students are offered when they decide to learn spoken Arabic. This sub-dialect comprises the major towns in the countries of the mother dialect. Probably, the most noticeable difference in UEM is the pronunciation of the letter “ق” as hamza “ء”. In general, the pronunciation of the letter “ق” in addition to his/her accent determine where the Arab speaker is from. Another three major accent distinctions mark the Eastern Mediterranean family as follows: in northern-urban Egypt, the non-Semitic pronunciation of the letter “jeem” “ج” as “g”, in central and western Syria and Lebanon, the pronunciation of the letter “qaf” like written Arabic (excluding cities of UEM) and the tone of the feminine “T” final letter (including UEM). The second family of dialect is the Bedouin dialects, which stretch from Libya to southern Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Saudi and Gulf states, Iraq, part of Jordan to eastern Syria. The Bedouin dialect family is known for its special pronunciation of the three letters “kaf, qaf and dad” “ض، ق، ك”. The non-Semitic pronunciation of the two letters “ق، ك” as “ch” and “g” respectively in the Bedouin family is a result of influence from the neighboring Persian language. The family of Magribi dialects that are used in Tunis, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania is not currently included in this map due to lack of enough information.

### Spoken and Written Arabic on TV and radio broadcasts

Program	Spoken	Written	Notes
News, reports and analysis		✓	
Songs	✓		
Interviews	✓	✓	Mixture
Drama, soap opera and movies	✓		
Religion		✓	
Children - cartoons		✓	
Average program i.e. history, sports etc. (reading)		✓	
Average program (interview)	✓		
Press conference	✓	✓	Mostly Written

The division given above is generalized and not strict. Note the following considerations:

- Private TV and radio stations tend to use spoken dialects.  
Governmental stations tend to use written Arabic.
- Lebanese and Egyptian stations tend to use spoken dialect.
- Political and religious programs and stations (Islamic-Christian) tend to use written Arabic.
- Programs with interactive language and live contact tend to use spoken.
- The Spoken pronunciation of certain letters and numbers are often reflected when reading or pronouncing the Written.

### Comparative vocabulary: Accent is the main difference

The division of Arabic vocabulary between spoken and written is so relative that it is hard to make final judgment about it. The main reason is that spoken Arabic has-like other languages- a range of formality or informality suitable to the situation and context. The easily branded vocabulary as spoken only or written only – see comparative vocabulary list- need a special attention because it is not exchangeable in any case between spoken and written.

This list is also intended to show, how close spoken Arabic really is to written Arabic and the great similarities among dialects. It is neither final nor comprehensive, but it gives an idea about some common vocabulary differences. Other vocabulary differences are directly related to the local environment, including local dress, tools, names of plants and animals, for example. Other special vocabulary items and a few grammar points are also necessary to compare. The number of words that vary from dialect to another is actually rather small in number, when compared to the vast body of Arabic vocabulary (12 302 912 words). On the other hand, the words that differ tend to be common, frequent and repetitive vocabulary items e.g. the words for “good” “here” “also” “not” “speak” etc.